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DOI:
10.1177/0275074013478152

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Bartels, K 2014, 'Communicative capacity: the added value of public encounters for participatory democracy', *American Review of Public Administration*, vol. 44, no. 6, pp. 656–674.
https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074013478152

Communicative Capacity: The Added Value of Public Encounters for Participatory Democracy

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Abstract

Questions have arisen about the added value of public encounters for participatory democracy: do problems with living up to its promises occur because of or despite public professionals and citizens coming together? This paper presents the findings of a study that examined their public encounters, or communicative "in-between", in participatory projects in three European cities. A narrative analysis revealed how the communicative capacity of public professionals and citizens is imperative and yet largely overlooked; i.e., their ability to recognize and break through dominant communicative patterns by constantly adapting the nature, tone, and conditions of conversations to the situation at hand. Less time, energy, and resources will be lost if they pay more attention to how they communicate (process) rather than what they talk about (substance). As this proves to be inherently difficult in everyday practice, researchers could play an important role in cultivating communicative capacity.

Participatory democracy was introduced to promote a strong democracy grounded on the interactions between all actors (elected and non-elected) who were affected by a public decision (Barber, 1984). However, as only a weak(ened) version of participatory democracy tends to become manifest in practice, there are "serious concerns about an emerging gap between the rhetoric of hoped-for or taken-for-granted benefits and their materialisation in reality" (Hoppe, 2011, p. 163). Participatory democracy may have become the standard for public problem solving; making it work in practice continues to be exceedingly difficult. Research has greatly deepened and broadened our knowledge of the policies, institutions, and practices that engender success or failure. But among the many contingent factors that have been identified, one crucial element remains disputed: public encounters, or the face-to-face contact between public professionals and citizens (Goodsell, 1981; Roberts, 2004; Bartels, 2013). The key question here is therefore: *what is the added value of public professionals and citizens coming together in participatory practice?*

This paper reports the findings of a recent interpretative study of the meaning and added value of public encounters for participatory democracy. The main outcome of the research is a theory of communicative capacity, which claims that, *to enhance the quality of participatory democracy, public professionals and citizens need the ability to recognize and break through dominant communicative patterns by constantly adapting the nature, tone, and conditions of their conversations to the situation at hand*. This theory was the end result, rather than the starting point, of a narrative analysis of the stories public professionals and citizens told about their experiences with community participation projects in three European cities. This article presents the emergent theory by illustrating it with the findings of one of the cases and explains its importance for participatory democracy.

The first section argues that whether a strong or weak version of participatory democracy emerges hinges, to an important degree, on the role of public encounters. Building

on Iris Marion Young's (2000) communicative democracy, I argue that analyzing public encounters, or "communicative in-between", is a valuable approach to broadening and deepening participatory democracy. The second section explains how the research has done so. It accounts for the narrative analysis that was conducted and explains how a theory grounded in the empirical data emerged from the analytical process. Focusing on one – seemingly successful– case, the subsequent section presents the emergent theory: (1) public professionals and citizens sustain dominant communicative patterns, (2) processes of participatory practice draw them into these dominant patterns, and (3) communicative capacity can help to enhance the added value of their encounters. The final section explains what communicative capacity adds to our understanding of participatory democracy and how researchers could help to cultivate it.

Participatory Democracy: From a Strong to a Weak Story of Public Encounters

Over the course of the twentieth century, Western societies have reserved the authority to take and enact binding public decisions to the system of representative democracy and bureaucratic government. During the last decades, this norm has been challenged by a more plural notion of democracy, in which non-elected individuals and agencies involved with, or affected by, public problems should influence related decision making and implementation (Pateman, 1975; Barber, 1984; Habermas, 1984). Accordingly, Western governments have implemented reforms to facilitate more equal, inclusive, and deliberative encounters that would better solve public problems. Although participatory democracy has not replaced representative democracy in all walks of life, collaboration between public agencies and other stakeholders in networks and direct involvement of citizens in governance processes have become widespread practices and unshakable norms in Western societies (OECD, 2001;

Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003; Innes & Booher, 2010). However, participatory democracy often does not live up to its promises (e.g., Burton et al., 2004; Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Hoppe, 2011). Why?

A useful way of making sense of this situation is to represent the development of participatory democracy as a historical narrative built on particular knowledge claims about its current and desired nature (Bevir, 2010, esp. pp. 10-11). By distinguishing between three generations of debate (Elstub, 2010), a storyline can be teased out in which public encounters were first portrayed as a key ingredient for the development of strong democracy, but, as participatory democracy in practice often turned into a much weaker version than originally intended, their added value started to be questioned within the large number of contextual factors that have been found to matter. An alternative approach to understanding public encounters, then, can lead to new insights on how to broaden and deepen participatory democracy.

The *first generation* of debate was mainly concerned with establishing participatory democracy as a radical alternative to representative democracy. Advocates argued in favor of the direct participation of citizens and other stakeholders in public decision making (Pateman, 1975; Barber, 1984) and the rational exchange of ideas, information, and arguments among free and equal actors (Habermas, 1984; Bohman, 1996). Public encounters no longer formed a problematic aspect for equal and accountable exercise of public authority (e.g., Lipsky, 1980), but became a key ingredient for nurturing a strong democracy (Bartels, 2013). In areas as diverse as environmental policy, health care, food regulation, and spatial planning, the quality of public service delivery and governance came to depend to a large extent on the structural encounters between public professionals and citizens.

A *second generation* emerged in which normative debate focused on "the problem of how this ideal would be approximated in societies characterized by deep disagreements,

social problems of enormous complexity and the blunt instruments of available institutions" (Bohman, 1998, p. 401). Several alternative normative ideals were developed to the procedural view (ideal procedures are needed that enable fair public reasoning and collective choice) and the substantive view (values such as inclusion, equality, and liberty need to guarantee that the substantive decisions are deemed legitimate and fair) (Cohen, 1996, pp. 101-102). These critiques found assuming or striving for shared understandings and unity a too narrow foundation to buttress strong democracy in practice. Instead, they took difference as a starting point to better accommodate pluralism and overcome divisions. Most notably, the ideals of radical pluralism (Mouffe, 2000) and communicative democracy (Young, 2000) aimed at enhancing the quality of the ineradicable political struggles generated by the practice of dealing with differences.

Although this normative debate still continues today, a *third generation* emerged which turned to empirical exploration of "how to achieve ... deliberative theory in practice" (Elstub, 2010, p. 291). As Western countries introduced a vast number of new participatory policies with more far-reaching ambitions and a wider reach than ever before (Denters & Rose, 2005), we now have a burgeoning empirical literature at our disposal. Studies of deliberative polls (Fishkin, 1997), participatory budgeting (Baiocchi, 2003), citizen juries (Carson, 2006), and neighborhood councils (Fung, 2004) all demonstrated that deliberation enables mutual understanding and consensual decisions and participation can harness intricate problems traditional institutions were unable to solve. Sophisticated theories and models have been developed that go far beyond preliminary frameworks (Fung, 2006) in explaining, for example, the intricacies of leveling the socio-economic inequality of participants (Barnes et al., 2007), the professional skills needed to communicate with citizens (Wagenaar, 2007), and the dilemmas of designing and managing collaborative networks (Edelenbos & Klijn, 2005).

Despite this progress and evident successes with strong versions of participatory democracy, a weak version seems to remain dominant. Academics and practitioners alike continue to find it extremely difficult to close the gap between theory and practice. Comprehensive reviews conclude that the quality of participatory democracy is highly contingent on case-specific conditions (Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Ansell & Gash, 2007; Thompson, 2008). Evaluations repeatedly display disappointment with participatory dynamics and outcomes (Carley et al., 2000; Burton et al., 2004; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006). Participatory projects usually run into a set of recurring problems (Hoppe, 2011, pp. 174-180), largely similar to those faced in earlier forms of participation, and are only modestly effective in dealing with these (Lowndes et al., 2001a; Hastings, 2002; Sinclair, 2008).

Consequently, the added value of public encounters no longer goes unchallenged. For example, the Big Society policy of the incumbent British government asserts that government should "roll back" and "empower" citizens to solve local problems by themselves (Cabinet Office, 2010). Participation policy in the Netherlands shows a similar trend: citizens should have ample "room to develop initiatives ... and take responsibility" without "interference" of public professionals (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2009, p. 1). These policies do not question the value of participatory democracy *per se*, but, rather, *the added value of public encounters*. This sparks several important questions: Can public professionals and citizens make a difference by coming together? Are failures and problems because of or despite public encounters? And how could the added value of public encounters be enhanced?

A variety of approaches is possible to cast more light on these questions. Urban regime theory (Stone, 2005), or a variation thereof (Stout, 2010; McKenna, 2011), offers a popular perspective: public professionals and citizens meet in a politico-economical system that structures and constrains participatory outcomes. The argument, in brief, is that public encounters take place at the intersection of economical imperatives for regeneration,

investment, and redistribution, and political skirmish about who gets what, and who is included and excluded. Another approach is to measure how mutual attitudes and perceptions affect participatory dynamics and outcomes. Survey research has found outcomes to vary according to, for example, organizational culture, rigidity of pre-existing agendas and structures, and citizens' (dis)trust of government (Lowndes et al., 2001a, 2001b; Yang & Callahan, 2007; Bryer, 2009). A third line of work focuses on the everyday practices through which public professionals and citizens encounter each other. Studies of practice have shown how communicative skills (Wagenaar, 2007), the facilitation of meetings (Hajer, 2005), and problem solving competences (De Souza-Briggs, 2008) affect who can do and achieve what.

The research reported here can be placed within the latter stream. Building on Young's (2000) ideal of communicative democracy, it approaches "democracy as a process of communication among citizens and public officials" (p. 52). As argued more fully elsewhere (Bartels, 2013), this communicative process, encounter, or *I-Thou* (Buber, 1970), has up to now been insufficiently understood as a distinct phenomenon shaping the ability of public professionals and citizens to understand each other, make decisions, and solve problems. Although ample attention has been given to the distortions of Habermas' (1984) ideal speech conditions for free and equal deliberation, (Healey, 1993; Bohman, 1996; Innes & Booher, 2003), relatively little research has looked at what professionals and citizens say and do *as the product of the ongoing, dynamic, relational process through which they encounter each other*. However, sudden changes in the tone of a conversation, the disregard for certain modes of expression, or the look in each other's eyes all have a direct impact on the degree to which actors are able to talk about the substance of the issues at hand (Young, 1996, 2000). Such communicative practices do not result from pre-held preferences or fixed contextual properties, but emerge through the dialogical process of encountering each other in concrete situations (Bartels, 2013).

Thus, examining public encounters, or the communicative "in-between" of public professionals and citizens, might lead to new insights about deepening and broadening participatory democracy. The final section discusses in more detail the contribution of this focus on public encounters and the theory of communicative capacity. But let us first turn to the research findings and the methods that were used to examine public encounters.

Narrative Analysis: A Dialogical Approach to Examining Public Encounters

The previous section explained why the research examined what professionals and citizens say and do *as the product of* the ongoing, dynamic, relational process through which they encounter each other. But how can we distinguish and evaluate this process in the messy, conflict-ridden, and complex reality of everyday practice? Capturing encounters, or the communicative in-between, is a complicated process indeed. But it is all but impossible; in fact, several methods could be used (Bartels, 2013). The research reported here conducted a narrative analysis, an increasingly fashionable interpretative approach (Hummel, 1991; Forester, 1993; Stone, 2002; Elliot, 2005; Wagenaar, 2011) that examines the stories actors tell about personal experiences to communicate what happened and how to interpret and evaluate this. This approach has two main advantages for capturing the in-between.

First, narrative analysis is a dialogical approach in which *meaning is relational*; i.e., it emerges from the constantly evolving process of interacting (the in-between) to come to an understanding of concrete, contingent situations (Stout & Staton, 2011; Wagenaar & Cook, 2011; Bartels, 2013). These understandings are always partial and tentative, as they depend on the specific physical, social, and temporal ways in which individuals are positioned in the world. Focusing on the stories actors tell gives a concrete grounding to the course through which the relational meaning of encounters "emerges from the patterned activities we engage

in when we grapple with concrete situations that present themselves to us as in need of being resolved" (Wagenaar, 2011, p. 57).

Second, narratives do *a distinct type of work* (Forester, 1993) for communication: story-telling is an open-ended, subjective, value laden, and action-oriented mode of sense-making (Wagenaar, 2011, pp. 210-216) that enables actors to make practical judgments *in the course of* everyday practice. By telling particular stories, they actively constitute practices, relationships, and social reality as they go along. For example, diagnostic-prescriptive stories "describe what is wrong with the present situation in such a way as to set the direction for its future transformation" (Rein & Schön, 1994, p. 26). The crucial point here is that the meaning and added value of particular communicative practices are not pre-given and do not rest on a rational, objective assessment of their strengths and weaknesses for the situation at hand, but, instead, derive from the work that narratives do.

Thus, by comparing how different actors go about *narratively* in making sense of messy, conflict-ridden, and complex situations, we can start to understand how stories create, modify, and sustain communicative practices and processes. This not only helps to build a detailed image of the multifaceted practices through which they talk to each other, but can also reveal the broader patterns, tensions, and outcomes associated with the process. The narrative analysis reported here followed a grounded theory process to develop a theory that captured broader patterns, tensions, and outcomes while being firmly grounded in everyday practices. I will clarify this complicated interpretative and iterative process to some extent, but, due to space constraints, refer to the full report for a more detailed discussion (Bartels, 2012).

First of all, I took an interpretative approach to make sense of contingent practices with the help of an emergent pattern or concept (Bevir, 2010, chap. 1; Wagenaar, 2011, chap. 9). Rather than starting from a theory and a set of hypotheses and case selection criteria, I

engaged in so-called "practice illuminating theory" (Hummel, 1998): open-ended exploration of a phenomenon in practice to enrich theoretical understandings. I focused on a distinct and puzzling phenomenon (the added value of public encounters for participatory democracy) by enquiring into the practice of community participation: the face-to-face contact of public professionals and residents aimed at improving the quality of life in deprived neighborhoods. Community participation has become a norm for local governance, but its concrete forms, dynamics, and outcomes depend to a large degree on what happens when public professionals and residents meet (Taylor, 2003). The case selection followed this interpretative logic: Glasgow (United Kingdom), Amsterdam (the Netherlands), and Bologna (Italy) were selected because of the striking similarities in their policy ambitions for equal, inclusive, and structural involvement of residents in local governance, as well as the high divergence of their socio-political contexts.

None of the 60 respondents of the research actually said that communicative capacity was a crucial aspect of their encounters; this theory emerged from the narrative analysis. This emergent process was enabled by the grounded theory heuristics of qualitative interviewing, coding, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006; Wagenaar, 2011, chap. 9). The qualitative interviewing facilitated the stories of the respondents to unfold by asking active and open questions that invited detailed answers. This steered the interviews away from short, generalized statements, good intentions, and opinions, towards detailed, open, and extensive descriptions of personal experiences. For example, if someone said "These meetings are not working!", I asked them: "Can you give me an example of a concrete situation in which you experienced this?" (Weiss, 1994; Charmaz, 2002). The stories they told in response gave detailed insight into the ways in which they went about narratively in making sense of their experiences.

Coding the interviews helped to understand what particular bits of data *were an instance of* and what this said about the storyteller and the social context. Codes are active and evocative labels that try to stay close to what a respondent is saying while at the same time pointing at broader patterns and tensions. For example, the code *work in progress* (see next section) initially described the ongoing complexity of the work of a public professional in Glasgow, but it took on a much broader meaning when gradually appeared that there was a broader tension about the ways in which respondents structured their stories about the complexity of engaging with their setting.

Memo-writing helped to explain, connect, and develop codes and to analyze the plotlines, characters, causal beliefs, normative leaps, signifiers, etc. of which narratives were constructed (Rein & Schön, 1994; Stone, 2002). While initial memos were mostly detailed reconstructions of individual narratives, more advanced memos started to define categories, identify gaps, and look for patterns. By comparing more and more narratives, meta-narratives gradually emerged: i.e. the overarching stories of cases that reveal broader patterns, tensions, and changes (Roe, 1994). The key question here was: which code best captures the overall story of this case? In the Amsterdam case, for instance, this turned out to be the code *being in touch*, as the narratives predominantly revolved around having extensive personal contact focused on gradually enhancing mutual understanding, trust, and adaptation in order to find joint resolutions for concrete, practical problems.

Finally, theoretical sampling involved comparing the meta-narratives of the three cases to each other and creating dialogue between theory and data. The theoretical narrative that gradually emerged synthesized the empirical findings, spelled out the emergent theory, and clarified the links and contribution to the literature. This theoretical narrative will be discussed in the next section. To be sure, to fully legitimate the claim to have formulated a new theory requires an extensive empirical basis and process of theorizing far beyond the

scope of one article. This level of detail is provided elsewhere (Bartels, 2012). The aim here is to outline and illustrate the theory of communicative capacity. This is done by focusing on one of the three cases of the research (Amsterdam), as this case perhaps most vividly illuminates what communicative capacity is, why it is important, and what makes it so difficult to exercise.

Research Findings: A Theory of Communicative Capacity

The research found that public professionals and citizens developed and sustained dominant patterns of communication that limited their ability to solve local problems. Each case was characterized by a distinct communicative pattern of engaging with the setting in which they met, talking about the content of their conversations, and maintaining their relationships. Dominant patterns were difficult to change because these three processes of participatory practice (engaging with the setting, exchanging expertise, and maintaining relationships) drew the attention of local actors to the substantive issues at hand rather than to the way they communicated about these. As no mode of communication was ideal for all circumstances, public professionals and citizens need to cultivate their communicative capacity, i.e., *the ability to recognize and break through dominant patterns of communication by adapting the nature, tone, and conditions of their conversations to the situation at hand.*

Illuminated by the Amsterdam case, this section sets out the theory of communicative capacity in three steps:

1) local actors sustain dominant communicative patterns kept in place by the underlying tension between the belief systems of *Community* and *Planning*;
2) three processes of participatory practice (engaging with the *work in progress* of the setting, *struggling* with the content of conversations, and maintaining

relationships by *making connections*) limit their ability to break through dominant communicative patterns; and

3) exercising communicative capacity can enable local actors in determining who should say and do what, when, and how, exchanging different forms of expertise, and empowering each other to take part in conversations, make decisions, and solve problems.

To be sure, the case discussion provides depth and nuance to the underlying tensions and variations on the broader pattern. As it is impossible to account in great detail for the origins and development of these communicative patterns within the space of one article, details and nuances are cut out in order to make the broader pattern visible.

Dominant Patterns of Communication

The start of the Amsterdam Neighborhood Approach in 2008 marked the local commitment to further strengthen community participation. National government had introduced "The Neighborhood Approach" in 2007 as a joined-up approach to community participation in the 40 most deprived urban areas (Ministerie VROM/WWI, 2007). The policy granted municipalities, housing corporations, and other local (semi-)public agencies the autonomy and shared responsibility for developing their own local Neighborhood Approach (Andersen & Van Kempen, 2003; Dekker & Van Kempen, 2004). In Amsterdam, a long term participatory policy was drawn up to further deepen and broaden already existing organizational collaboration and resident participation. National funding was used to facilitate "resident initiatives"; a participatory budgeting system inviting residents to propose initiatives aimed at improving their neighborhood's living conditions, and, if awarded funding at a voting event, also to carry out their initiative. Monitoring the progress of resident initiatives was added to discussions of neighborhood management and jointly formulated

action plans in the already existing six weekly meetings of residents and (middle and street level) public professionals of the City District, housing corporations, police, and social work (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2008).

My research, conducted between January and March 2010 in one neighborhood which received national funding, found that residents and public professionals were entangled in a dominant communicative pattern of *being in touch [1]*: extensive personal contact focused on gradually creating mutual understanding, trust, and adaptation to find joint solutions to specific local problems. They brought many different ways of working and thinking to the scene and were in contact with each other in flexible, spontaneous, and empathic ways. Although contestation, conflict, and antagonism were undeniably part of their encounters, local actors pragmatically expressed satisfaction and frustrations about specific events, activities, and problems.

So, at first sight, everything seemed to be working reasonably well. However, the narrative analysis revealed that many problems lingered because local actors were lacking awareness of their dominant communicative pattern and the underlying tension that kept it in place. Consider for instance the stories of Tineke [2], an area manager at the City District responsible for coordinating the regeneration of specific quarters at a strategic level, and Peter, a resident who has been active for several years in the resident meetings of his quarter:

> **[The] City District is responsible for all social housing, and last year it drafted a MIPSA. That is a Long term Investment Plan Social Housing**... Just the collection of the factual information is already a lot of work, and then also looking strategically how we want these places to be used in the future ... **was so much work, and it had to be done on such short notice, that it has just been conducted internally**... So afterwards I went into the quarter with 'Yeah, ... these are the goals of the [MIPSA]'.

‘Yeah,’ **my housing corporation says, ‘Hello, um, you didn’t ask us anything, while we were supposed to collaborate, weren’t we?** And in the meantime you already come up with everything’. Um, yeah, that’s quite unpleasant. **But it is actually exactly the same with the corporations**, ... the decision making ... is at the top management level of that housing corporation, which has a lot more housing, covering many other neighborhoods, and they have to make a judgment ‘What do I do with my own stock, ... how is the current situation, which strategic investment decisions do I take?’. ... So I say ‘Well, pot calling the kettle black. I ... get confronted with the MIPSA all decided, but you actually have that investment decision of the corporation. **So let’s just with the two of us accept that we don’t have any influence on the level of this quarter ...’. Um, yeah, and then we were friends again and we were thinking like, yeah, that’s just the way it is, but how can you make sure that those two decisions are in fact coordinated?**

I have a piece of derelict land in front of my house. When I moved in there in the summer of 2006..., there were still fire fighter barracks then, it was announced that by the end of 2006 the lot would be demolished and then the ground would be prepared for construction and **in Spring 2007 they would start building there. It is still derelict now**. Um, so then we have an issue with the City District, with a project developer who has to build it, with a contractor who has to execute it, and with a housing corporation which has to purchase it. The last thing I heard was that it is [a contractor] who has to build there and that they are bankrupt. And **what actually is going to happen, nobody knows**, but really absolutely nobody. And **that’s dragging on for, what is it, three years now**. And no spade went into the ground yet, **absolutely nothing happened**. And **it is really a black box what happens there**.

> We can't even determine ourselves who has the lead, who eventually has to take the decision. **We don't know who to address for that**. And so you can't almost have any influence on it except for asking at each resident meeting 'What's the status?'. And then **just hope that the people who are there know something about it and are honest about it**. And that's hard. But it's indeed a very clear example of how all services have to cooperate, maybe not cooperate, and are not clear in the information they provide.

At first examination, we might read these stories as conflicting evaluations of *being in touch*: Tineke tells how restoring her personal relationship with her colleague from the housing corporation helped to overcome a conflict, while Peter says that, through personal contact, it was really hard to find out what was going to happen to the derelict land in front of his house. However, closer inspection unveils that both stories are based on the causal belief that local problems need to be solved by *being in touch*. Causal beliefs are deeply held convictions about what has brought about a certain situation, or will bring about a desired situation, and facilitate or legitimate particular events, actions, and values (Rein & Schön, 1993). By stating that she first needed to be "friends again" to address social housing problems, Tineke communicates the casual belief that sustaining mutual understanding, trust, and adaptation (i.e. *being in touch*) is the only way to find solutions. Similarly, Peter's story conveys that a low degree of *being in touch* can inhibit a situation to move forward: various public organizations are not cooperating and communicating well, leaving residents with nothing more than to "just hope that the people who are there know something about it and are honest about it". Greater openness, honesty, and forthcomingness (i.e., *being in touch*) would lead to more productive conversations.

Many other local actors told stories in which they expressed the causal belief that being responsive to each other's needs, ideas, feeling, problems, and practices is vital for moving situations forward and reaching pragmatic agreements. These narratives uphold an underlying belief system of *Community*: participation can only work if communication is based on social relationships and develops freely and spontaneously from interdependencies, common beliefs and values, and reciprocity. Formal institutions are not sufficient: it all hinges on the ability to deal with persons and to improvise beyond policies, decision making structures, rules, and job descriptions. At the same time, the stories above show that *being in touch* is a fragile process when personal needs and distress are not recognized or big decisions are out of reach. The main limitation of this communicative pattern, then, is that it is dependent on individual efforts and relationships and often does not lead to structural and widespread results.

As we will see below, some local actors challenged *Community* narratives with "counter narratives" (Roe, 1994) of *Planning*: participation can only work if people adhere to formal structures, plans, and procedures that sustain stability, certainty, and clarity. Such stories focused attention on formulating more precise goals to be achieved and decisions to be made, dividing responsibilities more clearly, and specifying mandates, budgets, and timelines for decision making and implementation more strictly. However, in Amsterdam, the very nature of local problems and relationships often precluded any strict planning or regulation: formal responsibilities for problems such as social housing or reconstruction were shared rather than strictly separated and plans for harnessing them were the outcomes of negotiation and implementation processes rather than pre-determined. Changing communicative practices based on *Planning* narratives could address the shortcomings of *being in touch*, but would also go at the cost of the flexibility, spontaneity, and personal relationships valued by local actors such as Tineke and Peter.

The Bologna case formed a direct opposite to the Amsterdam case. In Bologna, public professionals and residents sustained a dominant communicative pattern of *canalizing*: guided, ordered, and reasoned exchange of arguments within fixed boundaries to make concrete decisions. Their *Planning* narratives facilitated local actors in arriving at consensual decisions, but inhibited them in extending their encounters beyond fixed boundaries on the scope, timelines, and topics of their "participative workshops". They were not able have the kind of flexible and spontaneous conversations and relationships characteristic of the Amsterdam case in order to address severe problems troubling the neighborhood on their own terms. The Glasgow case, in turn, was characterized by a dominant communicative pattern of *making it work*: local actors telling *Community* and *Planning* narratives were pitted against each other about "whether it was working". While this helped, more than in the other two cases, to draw out the importance of, and tension between both belief systems, it took away a lot of energy and time from talking about how to resolve local problems.

To conclude, no communicative pattern is the most optimal or ideal. One might work well at a certain moment, but does not necessarily need to be adequate for future situations. The dominant communicative pattern is always likely to be challenged, because participatory practice is a necessarily imperfect, unstable process without definite measures to resolve local problems. This fundamental instability results from the irresolvable tension between the two underlying belief systems of *Community* and *Planning*. The case of Amsterdam shows that the dominance of *Community* narratives implied that participatory practices were necessarily lacking in terms of *Planning*. Looking below the surface of narratives can reveal how this underlying tension unlocks and forecloses possibilities for breaking through a dominant communicative pattern. However, as the next section shows, exercising such communicative capacity is inherently difficult.

Processes of Participatory Practice

The research found that the communicative capacity of public professionals and residents was limited because participatory practice consists of three ongoing, dynamic, and relational processes. First, the setting in which they met was a relentlessly complex, ambiguous, and changeable *work in progress*. Second, the content of their conversations was an incessant *struggling* over different bits and pieces of expertise. Third, maintaining their relationships came down to constantly *making connections*. The ability of public professionals and residents to recognize and break through dominant communicative patterns was mediated by the ways in which these three processes kept on drawing their attention to substantive issues rather than to the ways in which they communicated about these.

The first process of participatory practice that emerged from the research was that the setting in which public professionals and citizens meet is an ongoing *work in progress*. This means that the setting consists of a great number of actors, institutions, policies, and problems, which constantly change in form, meaning, and importance. Dealing with this process asks for constantly adapting the mode of communicating about who can and should say and do what, when, and how. However, being faced with often uncontrollable, unforeseeable, and even incomprehensible dynamics, public professionals and citizens tended to engage with *work in progress* by resorting to a single pattern of communication. In Amsterdam, public professionals and residents were constantly *getting to grips* with what was going on by deeply immersing themselves in the details of specific events, activities, and problems. The narrative of Samir, a social worker at a local NGO who supported citizens in their activities and mediated their contact with public professionals, is illustrative of this communicative pattern:

> we also got from the Neighborhood Approach again, um, extra money [for] house visits now… [P]eople go to talk about problems with residents from door to door. But that, if … you go just to talk 'Yeah, what is the problem?', 'Yeah, house is too small', 'And?'. Then you're standing there, while **you need to have something to offer**… On the one hand, … I see the Neighborhood Approach absolutely like something that needs extra money, but **it also needs an integral approach**… We need to cooperate with all organizations, just being clear… **It's all unclear** about the Neighborhood Approach, not clear between the corporations…, between the City District and the corporations there's no clear agreement, and also the other organizations which are active in the quarter, for them it's also not a very clear story. And also, um, you also see that … **the individual person is very important**. In some organizations, someone works there for three months, who just started to get to know the neighborhood and the next day there's someone else… **So you lose all, um, contacts that you've built up … and you have to make them again and that then takes yet another year**.

Samir was renowned in the neighborhood for *being in touch* with everyone, but here expresses his frustrations about how this dominant pattern limits him in dealing with the *work in progress* of the setting. His narrative is a *story of change is only an illusion*: "you always thought things were getting … better. But you were wrong. Let me show you some evidence that things are in fact going in the opposite direction. Improvement was an illusion" (Stone, 2002, p. 142). *Being in touch* with residents, for example through "house visits", is not enough in itself: it implies a constant *getting to grips* with what to do about not having the resources "to have something to offer", "no clear agreement" on who is supposed to do what, and a high turnover in people. Constantly having to rebuild relationships, working

agreements, and local knowledge is an ongoing *work in progress* that is painstaking and does not achieve durable results.

Although Samir is aware of the limitations of the dominant communicative pattern, his narrative points out the obstacles to breaking through it. The Neighborhood Approach did not impose a general structure or detailed set of rules, but rather provided temporary resources and additional institutions and practices on top of existing ones. This institutional flexibility created room for incremental changes, mutual adjustment, and tailor-made solutions, but lacking coherence and clarity of purpose often prevented local actors in coordinating their many different ways of thinking and working and resolving persistent problems. In the absence of clearly delineated responsibilities, detailed plans, and stable communication canals, there was a constant need for *getting to grips* with what was going on and what should have been done. Therefore, public professionals and residents in Amsterdam could enhance the added value of their encounters by cultivating their communicative capacity to talk about how this *work in progress* was obfuscating who was saying and doing what, when, and how.

The second process of participatory practice emerging from the research was that public professionals and residents were constantly *struggling* with the content of their conversations. *Struggling* refers to the cognitive difficulties involved with taking onboard new knowledge, acknowledging others' expressions of feelings, beliefs, and experiences, being recognized to take part in conversations, and learning to translate the nature and value of others' expertise. Dealing with this process asks for constantly adapting the mode of communicating about how information, beliefs, ideas, and feelings are addressed. However, as they always faced multiple truths, forms of expertise, and modes of expression, public professionals and residents tended to reduce their *struggling* to a single pattern of communication. In Amsterdam, public professionals and residents thought that appropriate

solutions for local problems could only be found by getting *under the skin* of people and their perceptions, knowledge, and beliefs. The narrative of Yvonne, a local police officer who patrolled the streets and coordinated a team as middle level manager, illuminates this communicative pattern:

> …with resident participation … you actually don't do anything else then responding to complaints and reports that come in. There are so many of those that it's impossible to deal with all of them. Those are complaints about, um, hey, nuisance by neighbors, but **it then appears that there are very long stories behind that**, **or you don't really find out.** People complain or feel unsafe because of those neighbors or sometimes hear things that aren't there, they hear that in gossip, and you have to, **you're then digging a lot for the concrete complaint that's behind it and also … you can do something with**. Reports about … things that happen in the street, um, where you're usually not present on the moment it happens, or just too late, then it already stopped… With a lot of complaints that we get I can't immediately, um, act upon. And … **that's a shame sometimes, because you're also a do-er**, you also want to solve problems, but **sometimes it helps more to take it in like a sponge**. Actually just accepting that you can't do much except lending an ear, sometimes registering it and **sometimes there is a moment later when you can address it**. This way you *do* get to know a neighborhood like this very well of course. And all sorts of complaints that are behind it.

Yvonne explains that being responsive to all the demands and complaints she is confronted with during her encounters is very difficult because of their complexity, quantity, and unexpectedness. She deals with this predicament by organizing her narrative around the

metaphor (Stone, 2002, pp. 148-157) of a "sponge": "to take it in" and accept "that you can't do much except lending an ear, sometimes registering it and sometimes there is a moment later when you can address it". She finds this "a shame sometimes" and feels the inclination to respond immediately with words or actions. But being open, comforting, and patient while listening to the "very long stories behind" concrete statements can lead to information "you can do something with". This is a powerful image of the way local actors in Amsterdam were trying to get *under the skin* of concrete situations, exploring their intricacies together, and tailoring responses to what seemed appropriate to the situation at hand. The content of their conversations was shaped by their *struggling* with the perceptions, knowledge, and beliefs of specific people and problems.

While Yvonne, like Samir, is aware of the limitations of the dominant communicative pattern, also her narrative highlights the difficulties of breaking through it. It usually took a great amount of time, patience, and energy to get to the bottom of things, so that the content of conversations often took a somewhat idiosyncratic character and was very much dependent on who met whom at a particular time and place. Due to the great diversity in the backgrounds and experiences of public professionals and residents, they often did not see things the same way in the complex and ambiguous jungle of problems, policies, and people. Although they recognized the impact and value of the experiences, emotions, and knowledge that others had *under the skin*, inevitable misunderstandings, mistakes, and conflicts regularly limited their ability to have constructive conversations and produce durable and widespread results. Therefore, public professionals and residents in Amsterdam could enhance the added value of their encounters by cultivating their communicative capacity to talk about how this *struggling* was dominated by the idiosyncrasies of specific encounters.

The third process of participatory practice emerging from the research was that the maintenance of the relationships between public professionals and residents was a matter of

constantly *making connections*. *Making connections* was far from straightforward because participatory practice stirred up countless emotional and functional needs that motivated local actors to collaborate, while at the same time bringing about many tensions, barriers, and misunderstandings that frustrated their relationships. Dealing with this process asks for constantly adapting the mode of communicating about how to empower each other to participate in discussions, take decisions, and act on problems. However, as the number of actors and factors that could be connected far exceeded the actual possibilities for doing so, public professionals and residents tended to restrict *making connections* to a single pattern of communication. In Amsterdam, public professionals and residents were *approaching each other* by converging and clashing about the functional and emotional grounding of their relationships. The narrative of Diana, a resident who had become a trusted figure in her neighborhood among immigrant women, explains this communicative pattern:

> **I also help people here in the quarter a lot**, that's also something **that's very nice**. Um, and **people also come to talk to me a lot about their problems, because they have developed ties with me**, especially the women... But I have to be very careful with that… I'm fine with supporting and listening and if possible giving advice, but for the rest you have to do it yourself, also in terms of paperwork. But … when it is very personal then I say 'It's better to go to someone who can do something for you, because if I do it and it's wrong then I'll be in trouble'. And then I find someone for them, the Service Centre or the Support Point Women… And I notice that **if someone trusts someone in the neighborhood that it's then very difficult to transfer that contact to someone else. And that's where I often get stuck. It's pretty difficult, I can't always take that role**… It really takes a lot of energy, hey, really a lot, because there's a lot of problems. Here … there's also a lot of domestic violence. Yeah, **there**

> **are really very big problems, but you don't hear about it. It only goes to someone who they truly trust**. And I think **that's really terrible**. Because they're afraid to go to the Police, they're afraid to go anywhere.

Diana put a lot of effort in *making connections* between people with problems and the right professional organizations, but was also limited in her personal time and abilities. Her narrative sustains her mixed feelings about this through a *tragic plotline* in which she is the committed but restrained hero: Diana starts the story by stating that she finds it "very nice" to help a lot of people through her personal relationships, but ends up saying it is "really terrible" that trust is so crucial to solving problems. Problems such as domestic violence or poverty are difficult to resolve because residents do not feel comfortable in *approaching* public professionals, as they do not speak the language properly, do not know where to go, feel ashamed or afraid, or have no trust in the Police or a housing corporation to solve their problem. Public professionals, in turn, find it very hard to get access to the complex and ambiguous stories behind each individual case, determine what might be the best way to solve the specific problems, or find the time, resources, and legal possibilities to actually do something. Like many other local actors, Diana tries to harness this dynamic by *making connections* ("supporting and listening and if possible giving advice"), but "often get[s] stuck" in the process of *approaching each other* because "it's very difficult to transfer that contact to someone else".

In Diana's narrative we see, again, that awareness of the limitations of the dominant communicative pattern is accompanied by serious challenges in breaking through it. Public professionals and residents constantly ran into complicated problems which they could not solve by themselves, but needed concerted action over a longer period of time. This drove them into *approaching each other* by being responsive to each others' ideas, capacities, and

constraints, open and patient in listening, and accommodating in finding pragmatic solutions. However, this ongoing, lingering, and intricate process put their relationships to the test, because it harbored frustrations, tensions, and conflicts about having few perceived benefits. Local actors devoted a lot of time and energy to *approaching each other*, often without having the feeling that their efforts translated into concrete results. Public professionals and residents in Amsterdam could have enhanced the added value of their encounters by cultivating their communicative capacity to talk about how this way of *making connections* got stuck in converging and clashing over specific issues.

In conclusion, public professionals and residents tended to limit their communicative practices to one dominant form and were often not able to cultivate their capacity to communicate about the processes of participatory practice. As a result, the added value of their encounters was limited by the same recurrent pattern and associated problems. Public professionals and residents could enhance the added value of their encounters based on deeper awareness of how to recognize and break through patterns of dealing with the *work in progress* of their setting, *struggling* with the content of their conversations, and *making connections* to maintain their relationships. The next section provides a powerful example of how exercising such communicative capacity can make a difference.

Exercising Communicative Capacity

Although the research found that public professionals and residents were often constrained in their ability to recognize and break through dominant patterns of communication, in a few instances they were able to adapt the nature, tone, and conditions of the conversation to the needs of the situation at hand. The best example of such communicative capacity in the Amsterdam case is the narrative of Riet, a pensioner involved in many activities in her neighborhood.

> And then there was a meeting here and those [belligerent] boys also came there. Well that was *so* emotional… **At a certain moment those boys started to yell at the alderman [and others] and then I said 'Stop there, now I stand up,** now all be quiet, shut up, now I'm going to tell you what I did for you all those years… and that I was busy creating your own [youth] base for you, I was working on that with the City District. And out of appreciation you smash my windows. I still wonder why'… **And then those guys started talking and the whole story came out, because I stopped saying hello to them...** I said 'How would you feel if your windows had been smashed, and then still greet you guys? I don't think so'... Well, **then we held a break**... I was [outside] and the alderman comes up to me and says 'You did really great, there'll be a follow up'. **So we go back in the room and then one ... guy stands up and then he says 'I want to make our apologies**..., because we didn't know about all that you did in the area for us. And now we really would like, I hope you will be willing to greet us again'. And then the whole story came out. **And I say … 'Apologies accepted... But I don't want any trouble any more**, also not in front of my door'... I never had any problems anymore, never. So they still say hi to me and I got a bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates from them, they paid for it among themselves. **So, that was nicely solved. And from that time it just got a bit better.**

Riet takes us to a resident meeting where the conflict she had with a group of troublesome youngsters came to an emotional boiling point. Her narrative can be read as a *causal story* that links a concrete situation to larger problems, solutions, and value judgements by making use of characters, setting, plotline, and climax (Stone, 1989). Riet (the hero) had a conflict with a group of troublesome youngsters (anti-heroes) who had smashed her windows despite

all the things she was doing for youngsters in the neighborhood (setting). When the resident meeting they were all present at was turning into a fight, she stood up to express her feelings (plotline). After that, the youngsters "started talking and the whole story came out", the alderman made sure there was "a follow up", the boys made their apologies and she forgave them, and the conflict "was nicely solved. And from that time it just got a bit better" (climax). The point of the story is not that she saved the day by standing up, but rather that the added value of public encounters hinges on the ability of all those involved for recognizing, empathizing, and appreciating.

Communicative capacity, then, refers to something more than good individual communicative skills: the course of the conversation turned on several actors enacting a number of communicative practices in the process of encountering each other. Riet stood up and spoke her mind, the boys told their story and emphasized the importance of greeting each other, and the alderman made sure apologies were exchanged. These communicative practices turned their attention away from *what* they were talking about to *how* they were talking about it. This story beautifully illuminates how the emergence of such communicative capacity is a difficult and fragile process that flourishes or perishes "in-between" people implicated in concrete situations.

To be sure, this is only one instance in which communicative capacity emerged and made a difference to dealing with the problem at hand. A lot of hard work is needed for it to structurally deepen and broaden participatory democracy. Public professionals and residents should acknowledge that they can enhance the added value of their encounters by adapting the nature, tone, and conditions of the conversation to the needs of the situation at hand. In Riet's narrative, this actually meant reaffirming the dominant communicative pattern, as the situation at hand (conflict and lack of recognition) needed *being in touch* to be resolved. In the case of Amsterdam, though, exercising communicative capacity will in most cases mean

more often breaking through this dominant communicative pattern, but, of course without throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The next and final section considers the contribution of this theory of communicative capacity.

Conclusions: Communicative Capacity, Public Encounters, and Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy has increasingly become a standard for modern governance, but often does not live up to its promises. A key question in this respect is whether failures and problems are because of or despite public professionals and citizens coming together. The narrative analysis presented here suggests that the added value of public encounters for an important part depends on their communicative capacity: *the ability to recognize and break through dominant communicative patterns by adapting the nature, tone, and conditions of conversations to the situation at hand*. Public professionals and citizens often get stuck in dominant communicative patterns, so that they keep on having the same conversations over and over again, facing many recurring problems, and not seeing a way out of conflictual deadlock. Lacking communicative capacity means wasting precious time, resources, and energy, and damaging trust, relationships, and willingness to collaborate.

The narrative analysis of the stories public professionals and residents told about their experiences with the Amsterdam Neighborhood Approach revealed what communicative capacity is, why it is do difficult to exercise, and how this might nevertheless be done. A theory of communicative capacity was developed in three parts:

1) local actors sustain dominant communicative patterns kept in place by the underlying tension between the belief systems of *Community* and *Planning*;

2) three processes of participatory practice (engaging with the *work in progress* of the setting, *struggling* with the content of conversations, and maintaining relationships by *making connections*) limit their ability to break through dominant communicative patterns; and
3) exercising communicative capacity can enable local actors in determining who should say and do what, when, and how, exchanging different forms of expertise, and empowering each other to take part in conversations, make decisions, and solve problems.

All the six local actors cited here, consciously or intuitively, recognized the limitations of their dominant communicative pattern and the difficulties of breaking through it. However, most of them lacked the communicative capacity to adapt the nature, tone, and conditions of conversations to the situation at hand. Unfortunately, there is no simple cure. Only in the contingent, concrete situations they found themselves in we can grapple with the communicative capacity needed for finding the right words in an ambiguous situation or moving the conversation forward after serious mistakes and grief.

Communicative capacity is a social and situated ability that *emerges and exists in the interactions between people* while being engaged in the process, or the "eternally unfolding present" (Cook & Wagenaar, 2012), of participatory practice. It is practical know-how, tacit knowledge, acquired intelligence, or a knack for the situation: "What should I say now?". This cannot be codified or captured in a final definition (see Schön, 1983; Schmidt, 1993; Scott, 1998), and is neither a permanent and universal thing that individuals *have* irrespective of time and place. It does not comprise the communicative skills needed to achieve "ideal speech" (Habermas, 1984), i.e. perfectly clear, sincere, undistorted, and effective communication. Rather than *idealized communication*, it refers to the ability to determine

what form of *real communication* a practical situation requires (Forester, 2009). This ability resides in the "in-between" of specific people in concrete situations.

The communicative in-between, then, needs to be recognized as a distinct phenomenon and an all but neutral process: the things public professionals and residents say, or do not say, and how they address each other, are of significant impact on whether they manage to get something out of their encounters. Several recent contributions have called attention to the usefulness of process philosophy for making sense of the quality of this "interweaving" (Follett, 1919) of policy actors with each other and the situation at hand (see Stout, 2012; Bartels, 2013). The main tenet of process philosophy is that interactive processes are not stable things which we can master by understanding some fixed properties, but rather consist of forces and fluctuating activities which are "constantly reshaped … through … a dialectic that continually blends conflicting opposites into a[n] … inherently unstable fusion" (Rescher, 1996, p. 13). This necessitates an approach that does not search for definite measures or final resolutions, but rather helps to enhance the quality of the process. The theory of communicative capacity is an attempt at that [3].

Admitted, it is somewhat preliminary to speak of a "theory". Indeed, future research might identify other patterns of communication and processes of participatory practice. Moreover, there is only limited support for the claim that communicative capacity will enhance the added value of public encounters. Communication can break down even when local actors operate with the best intentions; any attempts to harness this will be futile when power holders intentionally communicate in unauthentic ways. Future research is encouraged in which researchers stimulate communicative capacity by foregrounding communication (Spano, 2001; Escobar, 2011), i.e. focusing attention away from immediate issues at hand and raising awareness of the effects of the mode of communication on the ability to resolve issues. By explicating the differences and tensions between various narratives, researchers

can facilitate local actors in coming together and sharing their stories, understanding the origins and effects of their differences, and identifying opportunities for learning and change. In this way, researchers would not provide readymade solutions, but rather facilitate local actors in discovering these themselves through processes of joint inquiry and learning.

Of course, communicative capacity is not the only element that matters to deepen and broaden participatory democracy. Indeed, public professionals and citizens constantly have to navigate the complex interplay of many political, social, legal, and economical factors. But it nevertheless helps to understand why they sometimes manage to solve problems and in other occasions they do not. The quality of participatory democracy depends not just on the ability of public professionals and citizens to manage the substance, but, more fundamentally, the *process* of their communication. More attention to the communicative capacity for engaging with the in-between of public professionals and citizens can help to advance Young's (2000) vision for a strong democracy:

> while most of the people most of the time do not achieve excellence … most of us recognize and admire excellence in others when we see it performed. Capacities for communicating in situations of social difference and conflict can be developed and deepened and a public is always better if more of its members have more developed capacities than fewer (p. 80).

Endnotes

[1] Patterns, processes, and belief systems are italicized.
[2] Names of respondents have been changed for privacy reasons.
[3] See the full report for more specific lessons and recommendations (Bartels, 2012).

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Annette Hastings, Kelly Kollman, and Barry O'Toole for their support of the research for this article. I gratefully acknowledge the constructive comments of the editors

and three anonymous reviewers, as well as the invaluable feedback of Margaret Stout, Henk Wagenaar, and Oliver Escobar. The fieldwork in Amsterdam would not have been possible without the extensive support of Liesbeth Ottes, Karin Daman, and Seyit Özilhan.

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